

## Action Learning Evaluation (Project Deliverable no. 3, WP3)

### Overall Summary

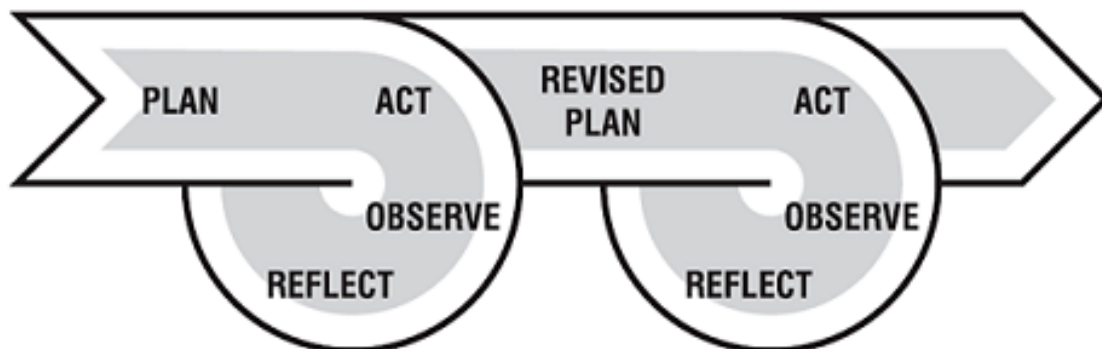
The 'Action Learning Evaluation' documents the development of the Action Learning process that has led to some of the most significant outputs from this project. Developments of Scenarios and our good practice recommendations in documents such as the Communication and language learning models; the Guidelines for educators; the Learning Scenario - Reward Model; and the Story board-plot. It is primarily based on feedback data from teachers and other educational staff that have been involved in the courses. The data set (see Appendices) include teacher reflections and discussions that took place during the development process, informal student feedback that was given during the course in the reflection sessions, as well as the results from post-course evaluation questionnaires given to teachers, technicians and Avalon observers after the courses. This material has also been complemented with a number of interviews with teachers where issues needed clarifying. This report thus focuses on the teacher/developer point of view. More systematic student feedback from the pre- and post-course surveys is given in WP7, but note that these results were also born in mind when producing this report.

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## 1. Introduction - Action Learning/Action Research

In the present project we have been using a process of Action Learning to develop and improve our course concepts. Action Learning, first developed in the 1940s, can be described as a learning-by-doing process where analysis of actions feeds into a reflective process leading to improvements, and where repetition of action with the implemented improvements then leads on to a new process of reflection and analysis and so on (see Revans 1980, for example). By definition, Action Learning always takes place together with others, typically smaller teams of expert peers working towards a common organisational goal. The method has been used successfully in educational contexts leading to a number of sub-disciplines, where the exact stages and details of the method are more precisely defined. One example is Action Reflection Learning (ARL), which has sixteen carefully defined elements of ARL, and ten learning principles as a guiding framework for the action learning processes (see Rimanoczy 2008, for example). There is also a close connection between Action Learning and Action Research, where the latter has been described as: “framework for thinking systematically about what happens in social situations, implementing action for change and monitoring and evaluating the effects of the action with a view to continuing development” (Hudson, Owen & van Veen 2006:581). To distinguish between the two, some maintain that Action Learning is the learning process that results from Action Research, and that the former thus in this sense is more of an individual experience, while the latter is more of collective experience. In addition, traditionally, Action Learning has been more closely associated with organisational settings while Action Research has been the term more commonly used in educational settings (for a more comprehensive comparison see Dick, 1997). With this in mind, it is perhaps more accurate to describe our method and process as Action Research, but most scholars today would argue that the difference between the two is minimal, and that these terms can be used interchangeably.



*Figure 1. The stages of Action Research/Learning*

In the Avalon Project, our Action Learning process consisted of:

- a) Course development ("Plan" in Figure 1 above) based on real needs (dictated by the contexts

- we are working in) and previous experiences (many of the team had been involved in teaching in virtual world prior to the project);
- b) Course implementation (so-called iterations - "Act" in Figure 1 above);
  - c) Data collection ("Observe" in Figure 1 above - based on observations & questionnaires);
  - d) Analysis ("Reflect" in Figure 1 above), which including discussions within the team, where we could share ideas and experiences from different iterations, as well as a final reflection questionnaire;
  - e) Improvements to the course concept ("Revised plan" in Figure 1 above); and
  - f) Re-iteration (back to "Act" in Figure 1 above).

Important to note here is that we are working in real contexts. The pilot courses we have conducted have often been part of existing programmes or have answered to real needs. It has thus not always been possible to conduct exact re-iterations of our original iterations. More precise details of the processes are described below.

## 2. Action Learning Process in the Project

The courses listed in this report all stem from specific learning needs in our existing contexts and educational communities within which the project partners operate. The courses therefore provide examples of language learning scenarios which are realistically achievable. Each teaching and learning context in the action learning process had its own limitations, restraints and resources (these are described in WP2 in the section in the Avalon Learning wiki called Course Iterations). The ongoing challenge throughout the project (but this is also true of education in any context) was to find creative and meaningful ways of providing a service (language education) within the constraints of our institutional environments while also bearing in mind what end-users would be interested in beyond the lifespan of the project.

Steps in the process:

1. identifying the teaching and learning context among the project partners;
2. designing the course in line with WP2 recommendations;
3. co-ordinating and teaching the course;
4. community reflection on the course;
5. a project decision whether to move forward with another course iteration or not and relevant feedback into the scenario development in WP2.

As it is clear from the steps listed above, there was close coordination and ongoing collaboration between WP2 and WP3 during the entire process. Some of the courses were repeated three times where we felt this was necessary for the development of the scenarios. Other courses changed shape and name as they developed in the interest of the needs of the end users we served during the project. Some courses required more testing than other courses and resources were allocated to re-running courses that needed to be tested again. One of the courses, Business Talk, had already been tested prior to the project and has been included and run under the project as a means of providing

an additional good practice example. One of the key resources in the process were the many virtual world teachers and experts among the project partners and those we were able to successfully network into the project from outside.

The scenarios provided in WP2 are the "distilled" description of the courses conducted in the Action Learning phase and are designed to give teachers ideas as a starting point for what can be achieved within virtual worlds within the specific educational constraints in which we all work. The scenarios have been written so that they can be used as they are, but it is reasonable to expect that teachers will wish and need to adapt them to suit their own realities. We have also made more detailed information about the actual iterations available so that teachers can get an even closer look at how things worked (we have also included numerous lesson plans for example in the iteration page of the courses).

Under the Action Learning process we were able to develop our own courses to meet the learner needs under the project, to help teachers who came into contact with the project develop so that they could continue to disseminate and put into practice the expertise they have acquired during the project beyond the project itself and bring in existing expertise and consolidate the teaching community even further. For example, the North Sami 1 course has only just finished, a North Sami 2 course has just started and the Catering Tandem course, which was designed under the project will run in 2011. Other courses in the pipeline include a re-run of the Beginners Italian, a Beginners Latvian course based on the Italian model. A Business English course run for the British Council in Tunisia and a French speaking circle.

The Action Learning process is therefore still continuing and is a key feature for sustainability. Indeed, we initially conceived that this process would start in month 5 and finish in month 16. However, we are now fully aware that this process actually started at the kick-off where we all first met and exchanged ideas about teaching and learning in virtual worlds and will continue beyond the project as we all continue to engage with our virtual world teaching communities and continue to teach in virtual worlds in our own contexts. One of the reasons why we went to great pains to ensure that the courses we delivered responded to real needs in the communities in which we operate is so that the courses would continue to make sense beyond the project. We feel that for innovation to become embedded, it has to be meaningful and practical and these have been the two main guidelines that we have used in the iterations process and the development of scenarios based on this process. In this sense the scenarios, which are the final outcomes of the courses we ran under the project, need to be seen as snapshots of where we are at the moment in terms of our understanding of best practice in virtual world language education. Furthermore, the scenarios as they stand should not only be seen as the end of the development process of the project itself but they are also the springboards for additional future development beyond the project. They not only summarise what we have done but create the basis on which new courses can develop and the community we have built expand.

Furthermore, not only did the courses of each iteration string have a direct impact on the other courses in the string itself but all AVALON courses also cross-fertilised each other in a continual

process of discussion, analysis and sharing of ideas within and outside the project. What was learnt in the Italian course influenced the Debating course (for example). Many relevant discussions took place amongst us in Skype, in Second Life, in the AVALON learning wiki, at conferences, in emails, in meetings, in the workshops and in the teacher training course and the teacher's group which followed and via ongoing conversations between project partners and the larger virtual world teaching community and other sister projects such as NIFLAR, AVATAR, ICEurope, Virtual Life, etc.

Last but not least, the fact that most of the teachers who ran the courses in WP3 were also intimately connected to the production of the deliverables in WP2 and involved in the Teacher Training course in WP5 and WP6 also ensured that communication and information flowed between the various work packages swiftly and efficiently and creative input was channelled smoothly into practical outcomes. During many phases of the project, the key players in these two WPs communicated on a daily basis and worked side by side for hours each day in Second Life itself.

In the section below we discuss the course iterations and illustrate the rationale behind some of the key decisions in WP3 which led to the development of the scenarios in WP2.

### 3. Action Learning Process in the Project

#### 3.1 Beginners course iterations

When we first conceived of a course for beginners, our aim was to explore a course model which at the time was innovative for virtual world language education. The three main challenges we set ourselves were to create a course where:

all course content would be delivered in the virtual world only and we would not rely on external LMS as most courses in virtual worlds were doing at the time;

our target learners would be beginners in the target language and not at the intermediate level as most courses were in virtual worlds at the time;

the target language would be a language other than English as most courses being run were English courses in virtual worlds at the time.

We felt that challenge number one of delivering all content to students inside the virtual world and not via external platforms would help us focus more on the communicative channels of the virtual environment. We thought that the second challenge of offering a course at the beginner's level would help us focus on the visual and building features of the environment and the in-built tools. Finally, the third challenge was an attempt to start creating resources and appropriate content in a language where content had not yet been developed. Thus the decision to run a Beginners Italian course. Italian for Beginners 1 was run and designed by Luisa Panichi of the University of Pisa (Partner no. 8) and ran from April to June 2009 and involved students from the Leonardo da Vinci and Grundtvig target groups. A detailed description of the course can be found on the Avalon wiki page at:

[http://avalonlearning.pbworks.com/w/page/7682826/Italian-Beginners-Course-\(Grundtvig\)](http://avalonlearning.pbworks.com/w/page/7682826/Italian-Beginners-Course-(Grundtvig))



The feedback we received about this course was very encouraging. Based on this, we concluded that the first iteration had been successful and that we would use it as the basis of a scenario under the project. However, there was also interest in our project community to attempt another beginners course in a different setting in an effort to meet the needs in particular of our Grundtvig audience. This interest gave rise to the German for Beginners course.

### ***German for Beginners***

The project partners involved in developing the German Beginners course set themselves the challenge of creating a course that would:

- 1) use the existing teaching and physical facilities of a local language school
- 2) use the virtual world to practice language learnt in a face-to-face course which made use of a traditional language learning text-book
- 3) explore the virtual world for existing places where the target language could be practiced

The German for Beginners course was coordinated and designed by Heike Philp of LANCELOT School and partner Grenzenlos and invited Nika Beck as the virtual world teacher. The course ran from 10th March 2010 to 19th of May 2010 and involved students from the Grundtvig and Erasmus target group mainly. A detailed description of the the course can be found on the Avalon wiki page at:

<http://avalonlearning.pbworks.com/w/page/26178858/German-Course>

The formal and informal feedback we received from this course indicated that the course had correctly identified a specific learning set-up and need for the use of a virtual world but that additional development would be needed to make this a standard course more in line with the learning models advocated in WP2. In particular, concerns were raised by members of WP2 around the delivery of the course. In particular, this course highlighted that professional training is just as much a prerequisite for teaching in virtual worlds as it is in face-to-face or any other online learning context. However, there were a few ideas triggered by this course that found their way into the project outcomes and scenario development process. They included the idea of creating a list of Second Life locations worth visiting and exploiting for language learning activities (see list of virtual worlds in the Avalon Learning wiki at:

<http://avalonlearning.pbworks.com/w/page/31916653/List-of-Second-Life-Environments>

and the idea of using these locations also for informal learning opportunities (see the Italian for Beginners scenario in the Avalon Learning wiki at

<http://avalonlearning.pbworks.com/w/page/33496354/Italian-for-beginners> ).

Avalon would like to develop this course concept further in the future. We concluded that the first iteration was more in line with the learning models of WP2 than the German for Beginners course and that the Italian for Beginners course as it had been initially conceived would be taken forward.

### ***Italian for Beginners 2***

We decided that we would offer another course of Italian for Beginners based more closely on the first course than the German for Beginners course. We decided to bring in a teacher from the broader virtual world teaching community. The idea of using a different teacher was so that we could add a different perspective onto the initial course, bring in community recognised state-of-the-art teaching practice and further test the initial course concept before going ahead and developing it into a scenario.

The Italian for Beginners 2, also called "La Festa" was organised in a similar way to the first iteration but the teacher made a greater use of the building tools in SL and more interactive activities were introduced. Feedback from the course was very encouraging and we were happy with the outcome of this course. We had more students apply for this course than we could accommodate and it is our wish that we can offer it again next year. However, the final decision that was made in WP2 was that the final Italian for Beginners scenario would be based mainly on the first iteration as it required only basic Second Life skills of the teacher and it was decided that this would be a more appropriate deliverable for our end users (teachers who are new to virtual worlds).

The final outcome of this iteration process is the Italian for Beginners scenario in WP2.

### **3.2 Debating course iterations**

The debating course iterations were based on an oral proficiency course which had already been run by Partner 10 Mid Sweden prior to the project. However, the ambition this time was to create a course which would be more collaborative and interactive in nature as well as academic. For this reason it was decided to create a debating course which was also slightly competitive in nature in line with what we were also trying to achieve with the Reward Model. The course attracted Erasmus students and Leonardo da Vinci students from within the project and brought together students from Sweden, the UK, Italy and the US. One of the main challenges for this course was the creation of an authentic experience for all involved which meant that a lot of planning went into making sure that the topics of the debates were relevant to all students and that the students who took part could relate to the debate model.

#### ***Debating course 1***

Feedback from the first iteration of this course indicated that we had reached our objectives and that this was a course WP2 wanted to develop into a scenario. We would have liked to have run the course again but the term and timetable of students and collaborating universities were such at this point that it made it impossible to bring students together (summer was approaching). However, there were two specific needs within the project to adapt the initial model to modified contexts. One modification of this iteration resulted in the FCE Speaking skills course which was run by partner British Council and which was popular with its end user.

#### ***FCE speaking skills***

Feedback from this course was such that WP2 decided that it would create an additional scenario based on this course.

In addition to this course, another need arose with Partner 10 (Mid Sweden University) and Partner

8 (Pisa University) to create a shorter modified version of the Debating course based on its students real learning needs at the time. The course that was developed was:

### ***Speakers' corner***

Feedback from this adaptation of the original iteration was positive but WP2 made the decision to leave it as an example of a successful adaptation in the iterations of the project rather than develop it into a scenario as it was felt that the Debating course scenario was more complete and thus more useful to the project's end users.

The final outcome of this iteration process were the Debating Course scenario and the FCE Speaking skills scenario in WP2.

### **3.3 Business English course iterations**

The business English course iterations took their inspiration from a similar course which had already been tested successfully by partner Talkademy mainly with Erasmus students. At the beginning of the project WP2 identified this as a course which could be easily adapted for a broader audience including Grundtvig and that a business course made sense in terms of end user needs under the project. The course built on existing expertise from partner Talkademy and partner British Council in particular. Following great demand for this course, two iterations were run in parallel and brought together for the final lesson. The iterations were :

#### ***Business English course 1a and Business English course 1b***

Feedback and evaluation from the course was such that we were convinced that the course idea was one we wanted to take forward and develop into a scenario under WP2. However, feedback had indicated that too much knowledge about virtual worlds by students had been assumed in the first two iterations and that there was a need to simplify and slow down the pace of the course so that more time could be devoted to language learning rather than learning about the virtual world. Thus the decision to run a third course with a similar audience and a more focussed end goal.

#### ***Business English 2***

Feedback from this course was such that WP2 felt confident that it was worth while using the framework for this iteration as the basis for the scenario. it is interesting to note that, as with the Italian for Beginners Scenario, the Business English scenario was also primarily based on the more basic iteration rather than on the more complex iterations.

The final outcome of this process is Business English scenario in WP2.

### **3.4 Business Talk iteration**

This course was already being run as a standard course within the virtual world teaching community at the time when the Avalon project started. We brought it into the project via Partner Mid Sweden and ran it as a way of bringing additional best practice in the field into WP2 for the benefit of our



learners and teachers and the quality of our final scenarios. We were already aware of the fact that the quality of this course warranted it being turned into a best practice scenario. The course was run once only as it had already been fully tested to ensure that it met with the best practice recommendations developed in WP2 and as part of an additional quality assurance process. Our target audience for this course were both Erasmus and Grundtvig students. The course is different to the other business English iterations in so far as it focuses more on the informal language of business rather than marketing and business planning issues addressed in the other courses for example.

### ***Business Talk 1***

The final outcome of this process is the Business Talk scenario in WP2.

### **3.5 North Sami iterations**

The North Sami course is the most significant course run under the project as it enable the project to address two key areas of the project: inclusion of a minority heritage language and ways of addressing limited access to virtual worlds. The first North Sami course was a series of experiments of what could be achieved in the virtual world of SL for a heritage language which has very few text books available and limited teaching resources (and a restricted number of teachers as well) compared to other European languages in addition to bring together a community which is dispersed over three countries. In this sense, experimentation rose from a critical need which had been identified by one of our Associate Partners, Umea University. This phase is:

#### ***North Sami experiment***

This phase was too limited to be called a course but it was crucial in identifying what could be done and how to move forward. Among other things, this initial experiment demonstrated how other video conferencing tools which use less bandwidth than SL and do not require downloading can be successfully used to provide access to virtual world collaborative activities to those students who are not able to access the virtual world directly. It was this initial experiment that led WP2 to decide that a full scenario of North Sami for Beginners would be an appropriate deliverable to achieve as it met the critical learning needs of an important minority language group. At this point the North Sami teacher we were in contact with via our Associate Partner decided to take part in the Avalon teacher training course. The direct outcome of this training experience for the project was the design and delivery of North Sami 1 for Beginners, a fully-fledged course for beginners in SL.

#### ***North Sami 1***

As predicted, the results of this course were such that WP2 was able to use this course as the basis for the North Sami for Beginners scenario. The course is of particular interest as it can be seen as a "living text book" for a dying language. It is also the only existing virtual world course in North

Sami and plays a vital role for language revival. The course also adds to the other scenarios by showing examples of how students can carry out language learning activities also independently of the teacher and how virtual worlds can be used as a means for promoting highly immersive and authentic discussions about culture and identity. In addition to this, the particular nature of the North Sami language with its case structure makes the 3D space for the teaching of grammar concepts particularly relevant. The target audience for this course are Erasmus, Grundtvig, Leonardo da Vinci and heritage language speakers.

The final outcome of this process is the North Sami for Beginners scenario in WP2.

In addition to this, the course is also being used as a springboard for development of a North Sami course for intermediate students which is taking place as the Avalon project comes to an end and which will be documented in the wiki in 2011. This course has significant implications both for language revival and for the much needed teacher training in North Sami.

North Sami 2 is being run now and will be available in the Avalon Learning wiki after the end of the project as an additional WP2 deliverable.

### **3.6 Teacher training course pilot**

While the teacher training course and all the related deliverables under WP5 and WP6 are not part of WP3 language course iterations as such, the course deserves mentioning here as it had a direct and indirect impact on all of the AVALON course iterations and plays a key role in terms of community building during and beyond the project life-span and in terms of sustainability.

## **4. Summary of Teacher evaluations**

As part of the action research process we collected a number of different forms of data. The courses participants were asked to complete short questionnaires, some set up by individual teachers, some set up and run as a part of WP7 (see Appendices: The Post-Survey Evaluation Report (WP7): 3rd Evaluation Report based on an “AVALON Post-Course-Survey”, October 2010.)

The teacher-set short questionnaires have been integrated in various ways in the on-going development of the courses as has been described above. They are part of the teacher thinking that has gone on as a part of the course design, but also continuous dialogue that has featured throughout this project which has culminated in the teachers group (the Ning and bi-monthly teacher meetings), the conference and workshop presentations and other teacher focused activity, the SLanguages Conference 2010 (organised and run mostly by the AVALON project team) and the Pre-Conference Event at Online EDUCA with other European Project groups with an interest in languages or teaching in virtual worlds.

To provide a more teacher focused overview (some of the respondents were teachers who had joined the courses as observers) At the end of the project a more open-ended questionnaire was distributed to teachers and other partners who had engaged in various ways in the courses; this was distributed for the partners to report on their own experiences of the process.

We now discuss the findings from the teacher questionnaires and cross-reference these with relevant findings from the WP7 report: 3rd Evaluation Report based on an “AVALON Post-Course-Survey”, October 2010, based on course participants’ responses to the questionnaires.

#### **4.1 Teacher questionnaires**

Click here for a copy of the questionnaire sent to the teachers.

<http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/LMQWF76>

This report is based on the fifteen responses to the questionnaires that were available at the time of writing, they refer to a number of the courses that were included in the project:

The blended German course  
Business English 1 & 2  
Italian for Beginners 1 & 2  
The Debating Course  
Business English Speaking

The data from these questionnaires have been processed making use of standard data reduction techniques to surface a number of categories around which the debate in the questionnaires centred. These were not categories that were completely new to us, but were part of the ongoing debate that has taken place throughout the project.

The initial write-up of the data has also been checked over by a number of the writers of this report and the rest of the project team.

#### **4.2 Findings**

##### ***Technology***

All of the respondents agreed that technology has to be at the core of planning for courses run in Second Life™. This is partly because this particular tool and other similar ones (Multi-User Virtual Environments – MUVES) need a high standard of technology to function effectively. This technology needs checking before the course itself starts and it needs to be accepted that if someone is going to take a full role in the language course they are following then the technology they have needs to be of the necessary standard. Nearly all of the AVALON language courses made use of the pre-course technical check that was offered as a part of the project, however, two of the respondents felt that it was better for the teacher to undertake such checks themselves and one suggested that this could form an early part of the course.

It was also clear on reading the questionnaire responses that technology issues are not solved once only and will likely return at various times during the course: perhaps busy participants move between computers, from work to home, for example; components are simply not working, or fail; the headset, or another new component is bought and the participant is not fully conversant with how it works; settings may have been changed by someone else who shares the use of the computer. The course participants in the 3rd Evaluation Report (3ER) describe having difficulties in early first session of the course, but suggest that by the second session the problems have generally been solved. They also report having initial difficulties with Moodle, too, when this was a feature of the course. Most of these participants thought that their computers were capable of running Second Life™, but agreed that a course run there did require good technical know-how, or support. The respondents also agreed that these technical issues did have an impact on the quality of the lessons currently, but most would still consider doing another course and many would recommend them to friends and colleagues.

What is clear is that the teacher needs to have strategies to deal with eventualities such as the ones described above, and often deal with them within the flow of the lesson as not all problems show themselves at the beginning of a lesson. Several of the respondents talked about the need for a backup strategy, particularly for sound, which while vital in language learning is still one of the key weaknesses in all advanced technologies. Both Skype™ and Voicethread™ were mentioned as possible solutions for sound problems: Skype™ in the context of dialogues and Voicethread™ as an alternative to the presentations that the participants were required to produce as a part of a number of the courses. One teacher suggested that participants could be taken to one side during a class and their particular problems explored, because :

Often the problem is more of an emotional nature ... [e.g.] "I can't get my sound to work because I'm so flustered I am not really listening to what you are trying to say to me because I am hopeless and everyone hates me"... . Dealing with this problem away from the group had a really good impact on the course. (Teacher Questionnaire (TQ) 7)

However, although there may be technical issues, Second Life™ is perceived a useful space to teach in and two respondents make specific mention that the AVALON Learning island had been well set up for teaching languages:

AVALON Island was very well developed and contained various locations and tools which added variety to the learning tasks – Huts with separate sound parcels, Sandbox for free building, Barn for familiar classroom environment, Village for quests etc. (TQ5)

This view was supported by TQ11 who specifically mentioned the divisions of the sound parcels as a positive feature when it came to managing the spoken group work. However, one of the respondents who attended one of the Italian courses mentioned that she found that the group work needed more planning when it came to separating groups (TQ8) and that group work in Second Life, although motivating (TQ1), needed a lot of thinking about.

Skype™ and Voicethread™ have already been mentioned as tools that have uses in combination with Second Life™, however several of the respondents also discussed the use of an Open Source LMS like Moodle as a way of providing course material away from the face-to-face sessions, pdfs and email were also tools that it was suggested could provide benefits for learners between classes. The data presented in the 3ER supported the view that this additional out of world support was a useful addition.

### ***Community building***

Email was considered as a useful tool as a part of the community building process. This was linked to socialising, which was thought an important aspect of such courses and considered a key advantage of Second Life™ over other advanced technologies like desktop video conferencing and more closed virtual worlds like Open Sim. Second Life™ is a persistent space where participants, given time, can come early, or ‘stay on’ after class. They can also be encouraged to meet up outside of the regular classes, either informally, or as a part of project work. Three of the respondents (TQ7, 8, 11) also mentioned a role for face-to-face meetings in forming community. They all said that this was a useful starting point if possible.

Building the community and maintaining the build helps to promote interaction. In all of this it was mentioned that the teacher is, of course crucial to maintain a teaching presence (Anderson et al, 2001). Their attitude and enthusiasm for what they are doing is also an important factor. Several respondents talked about the necessity for knowing who the learners are in the group and choosing one method of communicating with them all. This might seem an odd point, but in Second Life, people might make use of different identities and establishing who is who from week to week can be a challenge. The recent establishment of the ability to make use of real names in Second Life may begin to solve some of these management issues, but at the same time may reduce the feeling of anonymity felt by the participants and promote the anxiety that it is sometimes said is reduced in online spaces (Hundsberger, 2009; Lefever and Currant, 2010).

One of the respondents did say that community creation had not been possible on his course (TQ13) and there is possibly a conflict of the aim of community building when you are running more formal courses. Learners come to a course to gain credits, or to pass an exam and may not want to socialise with other course participants; this is worth thinking about in the course design, this conflict of interests.

### ***Making more use of the affordances of Second Life™***

Several respondents (TQ2, 5, 8) talked about the limited way that Second Life™ got used on the courses, courses being an important word here. There appeared to be a tendency to treat the activity in Second Life™ as a course and not to make as much use as possible of the different affordances the space has to offer. While some of the tasks and activities described do involve, e.g. building skills, or using objects collected from others, or bought in market place, in many cases it was Second Life’s ability to bring geographically dispersed people together in a congenial space that seemed most important.



One of the respondents did comment that it was not difficult to create interaction with the environment (TQ9):

In my opinion, X used the platform ‘at its best.’ A great example of how to use it—even with relatively simple objects.

Some highlights:

- avatar gymnastics, including flying
- working with the environment: the flowers, the trees
- involving the students by letting them explore the island, take pictures, talk about themselves
- treasure hunt with a maze
- clothes shop
- setting up the party environment

Others talked about the use of mixed media, i.e. both using voice chat as well as what are called note cards (TQ3) and also the use of the text chat for recording both the conduct of the lesson, so acting as a record of the constructed syllabus (TQ7)—in this case the syllabus emerged from the needs and interests of the learners—or as a record of vocabulary use (TQ6).

### ***Further issues***

A number of further issues were raised by the data presented in this set of questionnaires. It was clear that teachers who want to work in virtual worlds are better off if they have had some training and have built up experience (TQ7). Following the successful delivery of our pilot teacher training programme (WPs 5 and 6) we have begun to work with other language teacher groups in Second Life to build a community of practice, this group meets twice monthly for exchanges of views and also acts as a place for newer teachers to meet those with more experience, arrange to observe lessons, or ask for mentoring support in the early stages of beginning to teach in Second Life™.

Timing was also an issue that got raised by two of the respondents (TQ5, 6). The actual difficulty of finding a suitable time to meet for groups of busy adults was mentioned, but this has always been an issue for synchronous activity. One respondent also mentioned the length of lessons, questioning whether 90 minutes was a suitable lesson length in-world. In the 3ER 70% of respondents agreed that the length of the course was adequate, but the question about length of lesson was not asked. This issue of timing can be linked with discussions about the general set-up and management of classes, which a number of teachers raised. Much of this, however, is probably the trial nature of the activity that was engaged in during the project where we rely on volunteers to engage in the practice. When the classes are set up more formally and people are committed to the course, then these issues of timing are less of a problem. This occurs when the classes are part of a formal learning process connected to an institution, which was the case for some of our learners where participants attended courses for credit (the Debating Course, the Business English Speaking course). Some people were also driven by certificates, which we issued for all of the taught courses (including the teacher course). However, it was also evident that people joined courses for other

purposes and saw less tangible rewards as important: people refer to the fact that they can actually use the language by the end of the course and that they can see the progression that they have made.

### ***Blended learning***

It became clear as we worked through the project that in order for some learners to gain access to the courses they would need a variety of support. This was particularly true of learners who had difficulty accessing the right kind of technology to enter virtual worlds. One blended solution that was tried was to make use of the offices of one of our partners (Grenzenlos) with computers supplied by another (Talkademy). These learners were new arrivals in Austria trying to learn German.

Within the teachers group there has also been considerable discussion of another blended process that could be adapted for use with a number of different learner groups. Helen Myers, a teacher of French at secondary school in the UK, is making use of Second Life™ to enliven her lessons and motivate her learners. She enters Second Life™ during a class and then works with other visitors to illustrate a different activity, or encourages the learners in her class to ask questions of the visitors. Helen Myers makes use of a number of the existing French spaces, which have been prepared for other teachers. This kind of activity can be easily transferred to the adult language learning market.

It is planned to explore this kind of blended activity as the project enters its post-funding phase in 2011.

## **5. Conclusions**

To sum up, we conclude by saying that the main resources for this process we engaged in were:

- the varied needs of our learners (i.e. Erasmus, Gruntdvig and Leonardo da Vinci)
- access to a stable and appropriate 3D learning space
- the teachers' know-how and creativity
- formal and informal continuous feedback from different sources inside the project (i.e. WP2, WP5, WP6 and WP7) and outside the project

The process was a learning experience for all parties involved. The learners participated in language courses and acquired technical know-how and learning skills at the same time as they acquired the target language. The teachers were able to develop and/or fine tune their virtual world teaching skills by "action learning" teaching, through the Avalon Teacher Training course, by observing others teach and joint ongoing community reflection. Last but certainly not least, this process fed directly into the deliverables in WP2, which summarise the project results for the benefit of our end users beyond the project. In addition to the above, the iteration process we have described above and direct requests for more courses from teachers and learners in our virtual world language education network set-up under the project has also set in motion conditions for sustainability into 2011.

A number of important issues were brought up in the teacher feed-back questionnaires. For example, the importance of technology readiness and the need for having strategies for dealing with problems (in the form of back-up plans, for example) seemed to be instrumental for successful courses. Also, grouping people and organizing group work in a virtual world proved not to be as straight forward as anticipated and needed careful planning. Further, community building after a course also proved challenging and needs careful planning with long term strategies. Finally, it was brought to our attention that in many cases we probably could have done more to make maximum use of the affordances of Second Life in some of our courses (building skills and using objects more innovatively, for example). However, Second Life has been shown to be an excellent way to bring geographically dispersed learners together during the project and in spite of technical hitches most of our students got a taste for more, rather than being put off.

Looking ahead, the project has brought together a fantastic network of innovators. New events and projects are already planned (see the project ASSIS (A Second Step in Second Life): <http://assis.pbworks.com> , for example) In addition, many of the scenarios tested under the projects are running as regular courses. With all this in mind the Action Learning process has only just begun and we look forward to further exploring the potential of virtual worlds in Language learning.

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## Appendices

Courses that went towards the Action Learning Report:

<http://avalonlearning.pbworks.com/w/page/31670715/Courses-that-went-towards-the-Action-Learning-Report>

Teachers Evaluations

<http://avalonlearning.pbworks.com/w/page/33481883/Teachers-Evaluations>

Results of the Post-Course Surveys (WP7):

<http://avalonlearning.pbworks.com/w/page/32236037/Results%20post-course-survey>

Post-Survey Evaluation Report (WP7)

<http://avalonlearning.pbworks.com/w/page/33338953/Reports>